

Executive Summary

Tobacco use is the single most preventable cause of death in Kentucky, accounting for 8,000 deaths each year. Kentucky has one of the highest rates of youth tobacco use in the nation. Kentucky youth begin using tobacco products at an early age and are at risk for developing nicotine dependence and tobacco-related illnesses that follow them into adulthood. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 87,902 Kentucky youth will die prematurely due to cigarette smoking.

The Kentucky Youth Tobacco Survey (KYTS) assessed the prevalence of youth tobacco use, secondhand smoke exposure, attempts to quit, receptivity to tobacco advertising, access to tobacco products, tobacco use in schools, attitudes toward tobacco use, and social influences to use tobacco products. The effort to conduct this survey was led by the Tobacco Use Prevention and Cessation Program in the Kentucky Department for Public Health. The survey was conducted from February to June 2000 with 6th to 12th graders in 37 randomly selected public middle schools and 40 randomly selected high schools. Representatives of the local health departments administered the written surveys to students during school hours. Completion of the survey was voluntary and parental consent was obtained prior to administering the survey. Surveys were completed by 1,282 sixth to eighth graders and 1,313 ninth to twelfth graders. The completed survey answer sheets were sent to the CDC for data entry and initial analysis.

Cigarette Use

Nationally, current cigarette use is 9% among middle school students and 29% among high school students. Kentucky youth far exceed the national average in current cigarette use, with 22% of middle school and 37% of high school students reporting that they smoked cigarettes on one or more of the past 30 days. Current cigarette use jumps dramatically between 6th and 7th grades. Middle schools can play an important role in preventing the onset of tobacco use. Currently, only about one-third of Kentucky middle and high schools offer research-based tobacco prevention curricula.

Nationally, 2% of middle school students and 13% of high school students report smoking cigarettes on 20 of the past 30 days. In Kentucky, these numbers are higher at 7% for middle school and 21% for high school students being frequent smokers. Frequent smokers are very likely to be addicted to tobacco and are at risk for development of tobacco-related health problems.

Frequent cigarette use is well established by 9th grade. A person is considered an established smoker if they have smoked more than 100 cigarettes in their lifetime. Nationally, 10% of middle school smokers and 30% of high school smokers are established smokers. In Kentucky, 20% of middle school smokers and over 40% of high school smokers are established smokers. When young people begin using tobacco they underestimate its addictive nature and the risk they will become addicted or suffer tobacco-related illnesses. Despite the high rates of cigarette use, 55% of middle school smokers and 60% of high school smokers in Kentucky tried to quit smoking in the past year.

Between 1997 and 2000, there has been a significant decline in smoking by high school males (48% to 36%). Although the cigarette excise tax in Kentucky has remained the same since 1997, the estimated average retail price of cigarettes has increased 53%, adjusting for inflation. The decline in smoking among young males in Kentucky may be related to this increase in the price of cigarettes. Research has shown that young males are particularly responsive to the price of cigarettes.

Other Tobacco Use

Kentucky youth also use other tobacco products at alarmingly high rates. Nationally, 13% of middle school and 35% of high school students report using some form of tobacco products on one or more of the past 30 days, compared to 28% of middle school and 46% of high school students in Kentucky. Current smokeless tobacco use among Kentucky middle school males is four times higher than the national rate of 3%, and nearly two times higher among Kentucky high school males. Nationally, current cigar use is 6% for middle school students and 15% for high school students, while 11% of Kentucky middle school and 19% of Kentucky high school students are current cigar smokers.

Exposure to Secondhand Smoke

Exposure to second hand smoke is a significant problem for Kentucky youth. Almost two-thirds of non-smoking middle school students and three-fourths of high school students report recent exposure to second hand smoke. Four in ten non-smoking middle and high school students are exposed to secondhand smoke in homes and automobiles. Evidence continues to accumulate that secondhand smoke causes heart disease and lung cancer in non-smokers. Children exposed to secondhand smoke are more likely to suffer from asthma, bronchitis or middle ear infections than children who are not exposed.

Tobacco Advertising

Despite recent limitations on tobacco advertisements, Kentucky youth, like youth nationwide, continue to be easily reached by industry advertising. Half of Kentucky middle school and 47% of high school students report buying or receiving an item with a tobacco company name or picture. Kentucky youth have strong brand preferences that mirror the marketing efforts of the three most heavily advertised cigarette brands. In both middle and high school, Marlboro, Newport and Camel are the reported brands of choice. Newport, a brand heavily advertised in the African American community, is the brand of choice among Kentucky African American youth, while Marlboro is the brand of choice for white high school smokers.

Access to Tobacco Products

Despite laws banning the sale and distribution of tobacco products to youth less than 18 years of age, 40% of middle school and 75% of high school smokers bought cigarettes in a convenience store in the 30 days prior to the survey. Only 30% of middle school and 32% of high school smokers reported that they were refused purchase of cigarettes due to their age in the 30 days prior to the survey. This apparent ease of access to cigarettes exists despite the 86% retailer compliance with age-of sale laws reported by the Kentucky Department of Alcoholic

Beverage Control (ABC) in 1999. Clearly, even relatively low levels of non-compliance leaves ample opportunity for youth to purchase tobacco products.

Efforts to Reduce Tobacco Use Among Youth in Kentucky

The Kentucky Department for Public Health Tobacco Use Prevention and Cessation Program receives funding from the CDC as well as a portion of the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) funds. Using these combined funds, KDPH is developing and implementing a comprehensive, statewide tobacco prevention and cessation program. One important aspect of this program focuses on preventing youth initiation of tobacco products and promoting cessation among youth. To effectively reduce tobacco use among youth, CDC recommends strategies termed "Best Practices." The strategies recommended by CDC Best Practices fall into five key areas: policy development, community mobilization, information dissemination and media advocacy, professional development and training, and surveillance/evaluation. The strategies based on CDC Best Practices are listed at the end of each section of this report as an aid in helping policymakers and the public understand the types of activities that are shown to be effective in decreasing tobacco use among youth.

Kentucky has a wonderful opportunity to make great strides in lowering both the short-term and long-term health risks faced by Kentucky youth who use tobacco products or who are exposed to secondhand smoke in their homes, schools and public places. The data reported here can help us to focus our efforts to improve the lives of Kentucky's children.